

DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 260 457

CS 209 286

AUTHOR Clark, Irene Lurkis
TITLE Listen to This and Tell Me How It Sounds:
Readability/Listenability Connections.
PUB DATE Mar 85
NOTE 14p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the
Conference on College Composition and Communication
(36th, Minneapolis, MN, March 21-23, 1985).
PUB TYPE Reports - Research/Technical (143) --
Speeches/Conference Papers (150)
EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Comparative Analysis; Expository Writing; Higher
Education; *Holistic Evaluation; *Listening;
Narration; *Reading Aloud to Others; *Writing
(Composition); *Writing Evaluation; *Writing
Research
IDENTIFIERS *Listenability

ABSTRACT

Noting that writers frequently use reading aloud to evaluate written drafts, two studies were conducted to determine the extent to which holistic scores assigned by readers to college freshman essays correlated with holistic scores assigned by listeners. One study used 39 narrative essays, the other used 39 expository essays. The results of the first study revealed a strong correlation. The correlation in the second study was even stronger, surprisingly, since the narrative essay would logically seem to lend itself more easily to reading aloud than an expository essay. These results suggest that those qualities of written discourse most emphasized in holistic evaluation (task fulfillment, content, and structure) can be discerned by listening as well as by reading, and that as far as those aspects of discourse constitute the readability of a text, readability is roughly comparable to "listenability." However, in both studies there was a certain amount of non-shared variance, and a difference in means of almost a full point between the scores assigned by readers and those assigned by listeners, these latter being generally higher. This suggests that some facets of written discourse, most likely spelling, punctuation and mechanics, cannot be discerned easily by listeners. (Tables of data are included.) (HTH)

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**Listen To This and Tell Me How It Sounds:
Readability/Listenability Connections**

Irene Lurkis Clark

Director of the Writing Center

University of Southern California
Freshman Writing Program
HSS Annex 201
University Park-MC 0062
Los Angeles, California 90089-0062
(213) 743-2521
(213) 273-0264

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Most of us who write use reading aloud and listening as a method of evaluating our written drafts. Writers read aloud to themselves; writing teachers read aloud to their students; students read aloud to one another. Reading aloud has long been associated with the composing process, and it is a truism of discourse that reading aloud a written draft will enable a listener to evaluate it and assess its comprehensibility and quality as a written text.

This idea that written prose can be evaluated by listening suggests that to some extent a readable text is also a listenable text, an assumption which suggests that formal, contextualized written prose shares sufficient characteristics of formal, contextualized spoken prose, so that evaluation of one will be a valid evaluation of the other--that is, that the readability of a text is strongly correlated with its listenability. However, this connection has never been established either theoretically or empirically, although readability/listenability connections have in the past generated some interest, particularly in the heyday of radio when broadcasters were concerned with writing "listenable" radio texts. In the realm of scholarship, Hirsch (1977) makes the boldest statement on the subject, asserting that "readability and listenability may be the same" (p. 94) in that both qualities adhere to the principle of "communicative efficiency," which can occur only when the reader's or listener's forward progress is not interrupted by thematic inconsistency, strains on short term memory, or insufficient contextualization. These constraints, Hirsch maintains, are the same for both reader and listener.

Hirsch's position is supported somewhat by the work of Kintsch (1977), who states that in comprehending stories, the comprehensive process is the same, whether a person reads or listens to the text, after the initial perceptual analysis. Kintsch points out that "from the point where words are treated as abstract entities rather than as visual or phonemic representations, differences in modalities are presumed to vanish" (p.34). Words

are organized into sentences and phrases on the basis of a psychological grammar, and there is evidence to suggest that the organization and content density of a text judged readable is similar to that of a text judged listenable.

This connection between the readability and the listenability of a text is further substantiated if one thinks of them as meaning "comprehensibility"; that is, that the terms "readable" and "listenable" are simply another way of saying "comprehensible" (Glasser, p.138). Defining these terms in this way, Perfetti and Lesgold suggest that "comprehension by listening and comprehension by reading are very similar at some sufficiently deep level of analysis" (p. 141). Their study suggests that the characteristics by which a discourse is made comprehensible are the same for listeners as they are for readers--that is, that people are "generally sensitive to information structure, foregrounding and thematization, and to sentence and clause boundaries. They tend to remember the same sorts of things after listening to or reading a passage" (p. 166).

If one thinks of a readable or a listenable text in terms of its comprehensibility, then the question arises as to whether one can measure readability or listenability according to measures of comprehensibility, such measures usually being conceived of in terms of reader or listener recall of read or heard material. Kintsch and colleagues (1975), working with paragraphs adjusted for proposition density and content variables, state that when presentation time is the same, recall is the same for both reading and listening. Similar work measuring comprehensibility in terms of recall done by Day and Beach (1966) and by Carver (1935) suggests an inverse relationship between the difficulty of a text and its comprehensibility by listening. According to these studies, easier reading materials are more effectively comprehended by listening; materials of average difficulty tend to give equivocal results, and materials intrinsically difficult are better comprehended by reading.

This observation is consistent with what all of us believe intuitively (the example which comes readily to mind is the experience of listening in bewilderment to an abstruse scholarly paper being read aloud without the advantage of referring to a written text). It seems reasonable that a more difficult text would be more easily comprehended by reading than by listening, if for no other reason than that one could go back and reread difficult passages, a luxury which one does not usually have when one listens. Recent work in speech communication supports what early broadcasters discovered--that a "listenable" style is characterized by greater simplicity--shorter sentences and more frequent repetitions--than is a "readable" style. As Katula and colleagues point out, listeners require a good deal more repetition of key words than do readers. . . .Hearers also need shorter sentences and sentences marked with heavily rhythmic patterns (p. 364).

This idea that there exists an inverse relationship between the difficulty of a text and its comprehensibility by listening is supported by the Perfetti and Lesgold study previously cited in which participants either heard or read four unrelated paragraphs and then were prompted for written paraphrase recall. Each paragraph was presented in two forms--in one, a normal sequential order of sentences was used; in the other, sentences were scrambled randomly, making the text difficult to process. The results indicated that all participants recalled more of the normal text than they did of the scrambled text, whether they heard or listened, suggesting that at least one factor which makes a text difficult to process (in this case, the scrambling of sentences) pertains whether or not the text is read or heard. The results also indicated that all participants, regardless of their reading ability, recalled more of the scrambled text when they read rather than listened to the text, substantiating the reasonable idea that a more difficult text is more easily understood when read, since readers have the opportunity of going back over the text when something seems confusing.

Yet, despite the fact that it is generally recognized that differences do exist between a readable and a listenable text, if in no other way than that a listenable text has to be easier to comprehend than does a readable text, writers have always used reading aloud and listening as a means of evaluating a piece of writing. How accurate is such an evaluation? Despite the fact that we all do it, can a discourse intended to be read be adequately comprehended and reliably evaluated when it is heard?

To examine this question, I conducted two studies at the University of Southern California designed to determine the extent to which holistic scores assigned to student essays by readers correlated with holistic scores assigned to the same essays by listeners. I conducted one study using narrative essays, the other using expository essays.

In the first study (Clark 1984), I used thirty-nine narrative essay exams from U.S.C.'s Freshman Writing Program, each essay containing three holistic scores ranging from one to four, assigned by three independent readers, all of whom had been carefully trained in the techniques of holistic scoring. The three scores were totaled, so that each essay contained a single score assigned by readers. Each essay was then given a number, from one to thirty-nine, and then read into a tape recorder by two readers (one male, one female) both of whom were cautioned against reading dramatically, so as not to influence listener perception. From the list of trained readers (about one hundred), three listeners per essay were selected randomly to participate in the experiment. Before each listening session, each listener was presented with a copy of the question and with the rubric, that is, the grading criteria used during the original grading session. Listeners were then re-socialized to the standards used during the reading. As in the reading, they were advised to pay the most attention to content, structure, and task fulfillment and to downgrade only slightly for surface level errors such as spelling, mechanics, or mild ESL interference.

Listeners were also encouraged to operate the tape recorder on their own--that is, to set their own pace, to listen to the essay as many times as they found necessary, and to replay any sections they found problematic. This flexibility enabled listeners to replicate the kind of experience listeners generally have when they listen to writing for the purpose of evaluating it. Certainly in any composition group workshop, listeners have always been encouraged to stop the reader with questions such as "Wait a minute; I didn't quite get that. Would you please read that section again." Thus, the use of the tape recorder enabled the listeners to use methods of comprehending and evaluating similar to those used by readers.

The second study was conducted in the same manner as the first except that thirty-nine expository rather than narrative essays were used and that evaluation was conducted on a six rather than on a four point scale. In the second study, the emphasis was also on content, structure, and task fulfillment, surface areas of discourse only significant when they interfered with the comprehensibility of the text.

The data generated in the first study (see table 1) revealed a strong correlation ($r=.764$) significant at the .01 level. In the second study (see table 2), the correlation was even higher ($r=.844$) a surprising result for me, since I had assumed that a narrative essay would lend itself more easily to reading aloud than would an expository essay, narrative having derived from an oral tradition. These data suggest that those qualities of written discourse most emphasized in holistic evaluation (task fulfillment, content, and structure) can be discerned by listening as well as by reading, and that as far as those aspects of discourse constitute the readability of a text, readability is roughly comparable to listenability.

However, in both studies, there was a certain amount of non-shared variance (42.8 in the first and 28.8 in the second) and in both studies there was a difference in means of

almost a full point between the scores assigned by readers and those assigned by listeners, the listening scores generally higher. This non-shared variance suggests that some facets of written discourse, most likely spelling, punctuation and mechanics, cannot be discerned easily by listeners, facets which apparently did have a significant negative influence on the evaluations performed by the readers.

The results, then, suggest that task fulfillment, content, and structure can be evaluated easily by listening, whereas spelling, punctuation, and mechanics cannot, a conclusion which seems plausible and consistent with the way reading aloud and listening are usually used in evaluating writing. After all, it is reasonable for a writer to say, "Listen to this. Does the content make sense to you? Have I done what I am supposed to do? Does it seem well organized?" It is not reasonable for a writer to say, "Listen to this and see if the spelling and mechanics are correct." The results also suggest that if one defines a readable text as one that clearly fulfills a specified purpose, develops its ideas in a well-organized fashion, and is written in a style which can be easily understood, then a readable text is at least to some extent a listenable text. Factors of content and structure which make a text readable make that text listenable as well.

Certainly, numerous writers and teachers (Murray, Hartwell, Bruner) have commented on the value of using reading aloud and listening as a means of developing an ear for prose. Assuming that all facets of discourse are fundamentally inseparable, James Moffett maintains that "anyone reading or writing necessarily merges all three levels of coding (experience into thought, thought into speech, speech into writing)" (p.10). Moffett asserts that "reading and writing can progress little further than the limits of their oral base. If a learner cannot understand something said to him, he will probably not comprehend it in a book. If he cannot say something to himself, at least, he will not be able to write it" (p.31).

The writer Eudora Welty refers to the importance of reading aloud and listening in her recent autobiography *One Writer's Beginnings*. Welty says "ever since I was first read to, then started reading to myself, there has never been a line read that I didn't hear. As my eyes followed the sentence, a voice was saying it silently to me" (p.11). Welty goes on to state that "I have supposed, but never found out that this is the case with all readers--to read as listeners-- and with all writers, to write as listeners" (p. 12).

William Brandt and colleagues maintain that developing an ear for prose is a prime factor in learning how to write. Brandt maintains that "few students have learned to hear inside their heads the words that they see with their eyes. One can read simple prose with one's eyes alone. But the fact is, no one can **write** prose of any kind whatsoever without the help of his ear. On the other hand, the moment the student begins to hear what he is putting on the paper--his voice will be in his prose style." Brandt feels that the use of reading aloud and listening enables writers to internalize the conventions of written prose, which then enables them to translate speech into prose style.

The concept of using reading aloud and listening to help writers internalize the conventions of text probably explains why so many of us read aloud as part of our writing process. It also accounts for the high correlation coefficients in both my studies. As Dillon points out, skilled readers might be able "to realize the auditory aspects of a text by a kind of secondary capacity, like that developed by musicians who can "read" a score without humming it" (p. 47). The evaluators participating in my study, all of them experienced readers and writers, listened to the essays and imagined how they would evaluate them if they were reading them. And since they were judging primarily on task fulfillment, content and structure, the reading scores and the listening scores were strongly correlated.

Reading aloud and listening are important habits to instill in our students when we teach writing, and inexperienced or unskilled writers in particular need to develop a sense of what constitutes a "listenable" text. Since many of them are more comfortable listening than reading (Clark 1981), they will be able to evaluate their work more reliably and to develop a keener sense of audience than when they simply read it over to themselves. And while the connection between readability and listenability has yet to be clarified, it is important that we recognize that such a connection does exist and that we utilize it more actively as a pedagogical tool. As Macy says, "the true writer both of verse and of prose writes with his ear, hears what he is saying" (p. 81).

TABLE #1

THIRTY-NINE NARRATIVE ESSAYS

ESSAY #	READING SCORES TOTAL	LISTENING SCORES TOTAL
1	8	7
2	7	11
3	9	10
4	4	6
5	9	8
6	11	11
7	9	11
8	7	9
9	8	9
10	8	8
11	9	9
12	7	10
13	3	8
14	5	5
15	8	8
16	6	8
17	6	7
18	5	6
19	10	10
20	11	11
21	5	6
22	9	9
23	6	10
24	6	7
25	4	6
26	8	7
27	5	7
28	7	8
29	6	9
30	10	10
31	8	6
32	5	5
33	5	6
34	11	11
35	7	10
36	3	4
37	10	9
38	7	6
39	7	7

$r=.764$

TABLE #2

THIRTY-NINE EXPOSITORY ESSAYS

ESSAY #	READING SCORES TOTAL	LISTENING SCORES TOTAL
1	17	17
2	13	14
3	10	10
4	8	9
5	15	15
6	8	12
7	17	18
8	11	10
9	7	3
10	9	9
11	12	11
12	5	10
13	6	11
14	4	8
15	7	9
16	6	5
17	16	15
18	8	13
19	10	9
20	8	13
21	6	9
22	15	10
23	9	11
24	18	16
25	18	16
26	14	15
27	10	10
28	16	17
29	14	13
30	5	6
31	11	12
32	12	12
33	5	7
34	11	16
35	12	16
36	7	9
37	13	13
38	9	9
39	4	4

$r = .844$

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